

KCPR: Changes Through the Generations

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By

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Introduction

Since its first broadcast in 1968, 91.3 FM KCPR has been bringing Cal Poly students daily music and news from the comfort of their studio in the Graphic Arts building.¹ Originally started by two students in their on-campus dorm room, KCPR has evolved to become a large scale, student-run production. On the station's website, it is described as "the embodiment of youth...embrac[ing] change, champion[ing] the different and refus[ing] to conform to the status quo."² Throughout the years, thousands of students have had the opportunity to work at the station and contribute to what goes on the air for the student body and local community to hear. Due to the student-run and-operated nature of KCPR, the station has grown and evolved with each new generation of student workers. This paper will examine the history of the station and how it has expanded and changed throughout its nearly fifty-year existence.

I will argue that 91.3 KCPR has been successful in providing an outlet for students to explore their creativity while maintaining its academic mission. Throughout its history, KCPR has offered students a unique opportunity to engage in Cal Poly's "Learn by Doing" mission through their work in the station. KCPR's mission is for students to "develop the skills to lead a professional media organization that engages, informs and entertains the Cal Poly community."³ Programming on the station has helped break down barriers between students and administration as well as the rest of the San Luis Obispo community. Some of the key elements that allowed KCPR to succeed are the acquisition of new technology, allowing the students to take control of their own programming, and keeping the students on track with a recent reevaluation of the

¹ Bernard Wright, "Campus radio needs staff," *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo, California), May 1, 1968, accessed January 20, 2017, <https://goo.gl/dxrEhV>.

² "KCPR Cal Poly Radio 91.3 FM," *KCPR*, accessed February 4, 2017, <http://kcpr.org/>.

³ KCPR's *Facebook* page, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/dZLZiu>.

station. I will take a look at how Cal Poly students were able to raise funds for their own entrance into stereo technology. While students in the 1970s were focused on getting KCPR started, modern KCPR students can spend their time reaping the rewards of their hard work. At times, students have taken their freedom of expression at the station too far, causing the Journalism Department to reevaluate the station rules and standards. I will pay close attention to how those in charge of the changes made to KCPR made their restrictions and how these decisions affect the operations of KCPR today.

Historiography

When dealing with the history of college radio in the United States, which campus had the first station is up for debate. Hugh Richard Slotten, author of *Radio's Hidden Voice*, said in an interview with Jennifer Waits that “It depends on the criteria you use to figure this out... There clearly were experiments going on as early as the late 1890s with radio or wireless at universities.”⁴ Slotten goes on to conclude that the University of Wisconsin had “one of the first university stations to broadcast voice transmissions,” giving them a claim on the title of first college radio station.⁵ More important than who was first to broadcasting may be the fact that “radio stations at universities... pioneered some of the earliest experiments with radio in the United States and they played a key role in the establishment of an alternative, noncommercial, public service model for broadcasting.”⁶ One of the key experimenting stations was that of Haverford College, which many believe to be the first true college radio station. This belief is due to the fact that stations known as college radio were the stations “primarily run by and for

⁴ Jennifer Waits, "College Radio's Hidden History," *Radio Survivor*, March 09, 2010, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/aITfpd>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

students, whose low-watt transmission systems created from radiator pipes did not reach beyond campus buildings.”⁷ The all male student body of Haverford College launched their radio station, WABQ, in 1923. Soon, students began working on several projects, including international wireless experiments. Haverford’s station was part of one of the first intercollegiate radio networks two decades before KCPR even went on air.⁸

While select colleges had radio stations running by the 1920s, college radio stations became commonplace in the 1960s, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began granting class D licenses for ten-watt radio stations.⁹ This was when the concept of FM radio was relatively new, and thousands of universities jumped at the chance to have their own radio stations and be able to broadcast to their campuses. Existing stations had been broadcasting on the AM band for decades, which limited students’ shows to reach only the confines of their campuses. The AM wave was also prone to signal distortion and wasting power, which lessened the quality of broadcasts on the AM band.¹⁰ Switching from AM to FM gave students the power to broadcast not only to their campus, but to the surrounding communities as well.

The term “college radio” tends to be associated with the 1970s and 1980s, when campus stations across the United States began to be recognized for their contributions to the music industry. In her essay on college radio, Laura Schnitker reminded us that “bands such as R.E.M,

⁷ Laura Schnitker, "Archives, Advocacy and Crowd-Sourcing: Towards a More Complete Historiography of College Radio," *Journal Of Radio & Audio Media* 23, no. 2 (2016): 343, Communication & Mass Media Complete, EBSCOhost, accessed March 4, 2017.

⁸ Jennifer C. Waits, "From wireless experiments to streaming: The secret history and changing role of college radio at Haverford College 1923-2014," *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 6, no. 1 (March 2015), accessed January 31, 2017, <https://goo.gl/WReXCB>.

⁹ "The Public and Broadcasting (July 2008 edition)," Federal Communications Commission, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/mXQiys>.

¹⁰ "AM waves - problems and limitations," University of St. Andrews, accessed March 11, 2017, <https://goo.gl/wolcLa>.

U2, and Depeche Mode, not to mention the entire punk genre, owe their mainstream success to the efforts of student DJs.”¹¹ Most college stations were dedicated to playing music that couldn’t be heard elsewhere. “So many mainstream stations clung to familiar artists and proven sounds that new wave opened a huge gap, one that was filled from America’s college campuses,” says Ira Robbins, founder of alternative music guide Trouser Press, “College radio was the electronic beacon of that new infrastructure, spreading the word and transmitting a sense of community and purpose.”¹²

Participating in KCPR led some students to great successes themselves, including famous musical parodist Weird Al Yankovic (ARCH ’80). Yankovic had his own show at the station, fittingly called “The Weird Al Show.” In October of 2016, Weird Al was one of the first Cal Poly alumni to be inducted into the Mustang Media Hall of Fame. In his speech at the ceremony, Yankovic said “the one part of my college experience that even remotely prepared me for my current livelihood was the three hours a week of me screwing around and goofing off at KCPR.”¹³ Prior to the ceremony, Yankovic was interviewed for Cal Poly’s magazine and recounted his days at KCPR. “As a DJ, I was just spinning records, at first at least. Then I started adding more comedy to the show and I’d bring in friends to do characters...It became more of a comedy show than just a straight spinning the records show,” Yankovic recalled.¹⁴ Al also spoke of the story of his first single, “My Balogna,” which was famously recorded in the second floor

¹¹ Laura Schnitker, “Archives, Advocacy and Crowd-Sourcing,” 342.

¹² Ira Robbins, “Left of the Dial: The Evolution of Punk, New Wave and Indie on American Radio,” Red Bull Music Academy, April 11, 2015, accessed March 11, 2017, <https://goo.gl/rmwFIU>.

¹³ “Weird Al Recalls KCPR in Exclusive Interview,” Interview by Michelle Logan, Cal Poly Magazine, November 8, 2016, accessed March 11, 2017, <https://goo.gl/wJ4R2o>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

men's bathroom in the Graphic Arts building, dubbed "Studio 229" for its quality acoustics.¹⁵

After nearly two years as a DJ for KCPR, Al experienced a clash with the program director at the time. He recounted the reasons for the disagreement in his interview with Cal Poly magazine:

It was kind of an odd time because KCPR was trying to figure out if it should be preparing students for the real world by showing them what a real commercial radio station was like, or being a more conventional campus radio station, which was more freeform, experimental. Of course, I was way into the freeform, experimental side, and the program director was the opposite. So, it was a little bit of a force of will.¹⁶

My father, Donald Ready, worked as an engineer for KCPR at the time, and told me about the tension between Al and the program director. "The program director told me to act like I needed to fix the transmitter and turn it off so that Al's show would be silenced. I told her I wasn't going to do that, so they had to talk Al out of the control room," said Ready.¹⁷ This debate of students' freedom versus maintaining the professional nature of KCPR is still a matter in question for the station.

Humble Beginnings

"Is this the damn switch?" With these words, KCPR began its first broadcast in 1968. Two students, Gary Gardner and Alan Holmes, started the station as a senior project for the Journalism department. The two became the station's very first chief engineer and station manager, respectively. After original advisor Glen Martin passed away before the station went live, local broadcaster and Cal Poly broadcast professor Ed Zuchelli joined the team as faculty

¹⁵ "Weird Al Recalls KCPR in Exclusive Interview."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Donald Ready, interview by Claire Ready, February 18, 2017.

advisor.¹⁸ The students received a 2-watt transmitter from the University of California at Santa Barbara in order to start this project. “We had a budget of zero dollars,” said KCPR alumnus Frank Calabrese (IT and JOUR ’70), “Occasionally we’d get some money from the Journalism Department, but KCPR was just started by a bunch of people who really got a kick out of it.”¹⁹

Within its first decade, KCPR made major changes in its technology in order to better serve the students working at the station. In 1971 the station increased power from 1.8 watts to 10 watts.²⁰ Then, in 1975, they expanded to 2,000 watts.²¹ Through fundraising efforts, students were able to make technological advances even without grants from the university. Probably the most important development was made in 1976 when the station changed formats from mono to stereo (AM to FM). “Most radio stations were stereo at that time and most students had stereo radios in their dorms,” said alumnus Donald Ready (ET ’84). This made it important for KCPR to make the switch to stereo in order to keep up with the technology of the time. A change of this magnitude would require an awful lot of money, even with a \$7,000 grant from Associated Students Incorporated.²² KCPR DJ Larry LaFollette hosted a successful 80-hour pledge-a-thon live on air in an effort to raise the necessary funds.²³ Another fundraising effort was made with an on-air auction, using items such as records or rounds of golf donated by local businesses to raise the rest of the money. “It was like eBay before eBay,” Ready joked.²⁴ The auction that was

¹⁸ Jon, “Since its beginnings, Cal Poly's KCPR has been host to all kinds of DJs,” *Mustang News*, October 18, 2006, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/dBsoqK>.

¹⁹ Kylie Mendonca, “A long, strange trip,” *New Times SLO*, November 25, 2008, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/PFU25A>.

²⁰ *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo, California), October 29, 1971, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/V7CzBR>.

²¹ D. Ready, interview by C. Ready.

²² Jon, “Since its beginnings.”

²³ Lenn and Blair, interview by Keli Moore, January 28, 2017, interview 1, video.

²⁴ D. Ready, interview by C. Ready.

started for the purpose of converting to stereo has become somewhat of a tradition for the station, as it has occurred once a year since its first event.²⁵ After finally raising about \$13,000 for the project, six engineering students worked tirelessly to install the equipment needed to make the transfer. In exchange for their work, they were awarded the first 16 hours of stereo broadcast.^{26,27} As seen in Figure 1, KCPR's switch to stereo was such an important feat for the station as well as the school that the *Mustang Daily* reported on the event in a full-page spread.²⁸



Figure 1: KCPR student volunteers excitedly gather around the studio as DJ Larry LaFollette ceremoniously flips the switch that officially converted KCPR to stereo. *Mustang Daily*, April 30, 1976, page 4.

In the decades following the station's move to stereo, KCPR explored other ways to further connect with the campus. Students began compiling newspaper-like zines that included information on upcoming local concerts, reviews of albums, and articles of varied topics written by students. It is unclear what years the 91.3 KCPR Zine was published, though one issue

²⁵ Kevin List, "Going once, going twice: auction raising money for KCPR," *Mustang News*, November 6, 2011, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/k3KaJQ>.

²⁶ Jim Sweeney, "KCPR Goes Stereo Stereo: Campus Station Converts After a Long-Playing Battle," *Mustang Daily* (San Luis Obispo, California), April 30, 1976, accessed February 23, 2017, <https://goo.gl/8BZnCd>.

²⁷ Jon, "Since its beginnings."

²⁸ Jim Sweeney, "KCPR Goes Stereo Stereo."

portraying a photo of Weird Al suggests its inception in the late 1970s or early 1980s.²⁹ The invention of the internet provided another medium for KCPR to reach students. Recent technology allows students to stream broadcasts on the station's website. The website also features a culture section, in which students write articles about the latest happenings in San Luis Obispo.³⁰ This new platform allows KCPR to reach a worldwide audience, a far stretch from what was possible the 1.8 watt transmitter that the station began with.

Community Ties

While student volunteers spent the early days of KCPR keeping up with technology, students throughout the generations have been utilizing the airwaves to break down barriers and connect to their community. Throughout the years, KCPR has allowed students to take control of their programming, discussing a range of topics and playing a wide variety of music genres. Former Program Director and current KCPR DJ Gwendolyn Giles explained to me the process of scheduling the programs for the station:

The content for airplay is in part decided by the program director as well as the music director. The music director selects new music that is added to the station's stacks. The program director schedules DJs and talk show hosts throughout the day based off multiple variables including previous show quality, experience, music/topic preference, and time availability. It is then up to the DJ to decide which music to play based off the music provided in the stacks.³¹

²⁹ KCPR 91.3 FM Zine, n.d., 454 KCPR, Box 1, folder 8, University Archives, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, Ca.

³⁰ "KCPR Cal Poly Radio 91.3 FM," *KCPR*, accessed February 4, 2017, <http://kcpr.org/>.

³¹ Gwendolyn Giles, interview by Claire Ready, February 12, 2017.

Though music played on 91.3 FM is not restricted to certain genres, the station tends to focus on playing songs that are not generally heard on other stations. Former community DJ Sal España believes that KCPR “is the only place for new music on the Central Coast.”³²

KCPR has also been an outlet for the Journalism Department’s news program, providing its reporting classes on-air opportunities for practice. In the past, KCPR had an entire section of the station dedicated to news reporting, complete with a student role of news director. KCPR news anchors would often interview people such as ASI candidates and people running for local office. These programs gave Cal Poly students an opportunity to learn about issues that affected them directly.³³ In 2012, the Journalism Department set out to “create an integrated student newsroom that imitated what was going on in the professional world—or to get ahead of it actually—where we were knocking down walls between print and broadcast,” department chair Mary Glick explained.³⁴ It was around this time that KCPR switched from producing its own news shows to instead broadcasting a segment featuring Mustang News students. Though giving students the opportunity to run KCPR exclusively was theoretically a useful chance to engage in Learn by Doing, the actual results of a lack of supervision were not favorable.

Changes for 91.3 FM

Allowing the students the freedoms that they had for so many years eventually led to the station straying from its academic purpose. As stated by former general manager of KCPR Mark Rief, KCPR’s “primary purpose is to serve the Journalism Department as a Laboratory for Broadcast majors and anyone else with a serious interest in the broadcasting profession. We are

³² Jono Kinkade, "Changing the station: KCPR Cal Poly Radio dispatches with its long-time community DJs as the college charts a new course," *New Times SLO*, July 8, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/rNw26g>.

³³ Randie Hill, interview by Claire Ready, March 1, 2017.

³⁴ Jono Kinkade, "Changing the station."

obligated to supply a facility where all students can learn about radio.”³⁵ As time went on, the department became less involved with the station and students were left practically unsupervised. Mary Glick became the chair of the Journalism Department in the fall of 2012. With efforts being focused on integrating the other student-run media such as the Mustang Daily and Cal Poly TV, KCPR was largely ignored. “While we were busy doing that, KCPR was sort of humming along and doing its thing,” Glick said. “And all along I was asking, ‘What are we going to do with KCPR?’”³⁶ This question became Glick's top concern in the spring of 2014, when the issues involved in non-supervised student activity became apparent.

In the weeks leading up to KCPR's spring pledge-drive, two student hosts of a sex talk show titled *Getting It In* made a post on the show's Facebook page offering “sexy Snapchats” of their genitalia for anyone who gave a \$20 donation to the station.³⁷ The post was promptly removed and nearly a month went by before this incident was brought to the attention of the university and the Journalism department when *Mustang News* and *New Times SLO* broke the story to the public.³⁸ “[KCPR] clearly wasn't as well integrated into the activities and the everyday routines of the department as were the other student media,” College of Liberal Arts Dean Doug Epperson said.³⁹ In an email to Mary Glick obtained by the *New Times* through a public records request, Epperson warned “Unless you can provide a concrete organizational plan and structure that will preclude something this extreme from happening in the future, I see no

³⁵ Randall G. Kerdoon, “War And Peace My Year As General Manager Of Cal Poly Radio,” Senior Project, California State Polytechnic University, 1978 (San Luis Obispo, California: California State Polytechnic University, 1978)

³⁶ Jono Kinkade, “Changing the station.”

³⁷ Tyler Kingkade, “College Radio Show Pulled After Hosts Offer 'Sexy Snapchats' In Fundraiser,” *The Huffington Post*, June 18, 2014, accessed March 06, 2017, <https://goo.gl/1f9xyl>.

³⁸ Jon, “Student radio hosts offered penis pics in return for donations,” *Mustang News*, May 28, 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://goo.gl/MOgAt3>.

³⁹ Jono Kinkade, “Changing the station.”

need to keep KCPR. I'm very serious about this.”⁴⁰ Given this ultimatum, Glick responded by forming what she coined the KCPR Evolution Core Committee. This group was comprised of current student staff, radio professionals, professors and lecturers, alumni, and technicians. The Committee deliberated for nearly a year before releasing their findings and recommendations for the station. These conclusions were put together in a report entitled “The Evolution of KCPR: Recommendations Established by the Core Committee Aimed at Meeting the Academic Mission of Cal Poly.” In this report, the Committee suggested several changes to be made to KCPR's operations. The main adjustments included the rule that only enrolled students can be regular DJs, the reintroduction of a required 2-unit class for all those involved in the station, and the transition to prerecorded graveyard shifts.⁴¹ These new restrictions hurt long-time faculty DJ James Cushing, who had hosted a jazz show on KCPR titled Miles Ahead for 18 years before it was pulled from the lineup. Cushing described the program as “one of the more ritualistically delightful experiences of [his] life.”⁴² Though community DJs were disappointed with the new rule restricting non-students from participating in KCPR, they understood the reasons behind their dismissal. The new guidelines set in place for the station will ensure that students will be able to follow Cal Poly's “Learn by Doing” mission in a more organized and controlled manner.

Conclusion

In nearly fifty years, what started as a senior project has evolved into a highly successful, nationally acclaimed radio station. KCPR has provided countless students with opportunities to

⁴⁰ Jono, Kinkade, “Changing the Station.”

⁴¹ KCPR Evolution Core Committee at California Polytechnic State University, Journalism, “The Evolution of KCPR: Recommendations Established by the Core Committee Aimed at Meeting the Academic Mission of Cal Poly,” News release (San Luis Obispo, CA, 2015, California Polytechnic State University).

⁴² Jono Kinkade, “Changing the Station.”

experience broadcasting on a professional level. The station has helped launch students' careers and has provided a platform for creativity and artistic expression through radio broadcast. Technological advances have provided students with the ability to reach a wider audience, including the campus as well as the local community. KCPR's transition to student-only broadcasting will make the station more effectively align with Cal Poly's academic mission.

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